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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

Shearing lambs to prevent needle grass damage is among the hardest of jobs woolie operators and shearers do. Sharp needles and deeply penetrating spear grasses cover the lambs' legs and faces and bellies. Blades and combs of the shearing head have to be shoved through the matted material. And out in the pastures, mounted men search in high heat for a quarry more scattered this season of the year than at any other time.

Each year's conditions, however, are different. We have had a wet winter followed by the same kind of spring and early summer. The needles, we theorized, were not letting go because the continued moisture slowed the drying process, which always before meant instantaneous release of the sharp spines.

Hopes began to rise that scourge might be diverted by the unusual moisture. Every evening, fierce thunderstorms raged across the ranchlands. Damage was minimal. Now and then a volley of hailstones blasted the houses of a community. The only loss around my outfit were two big knots on my forehead from hitting a droopy bed slat when I dove under the bed during a terrific bolt of lightning followed by a tremendous crash of thunder.

But it turned out that the thunderstorms were the reason the needles weren't slipping. Every time a big storm system moved in, the tremors caused the barbs on the grass to take a tighter hold.

We spent over a week drenching and gathering and shearing. The lamb crop is large for our area, but so much excitement on the sheep always cuts off some of the twin lambs.

People claim, and have from antiquity, that sheep are dumb animals. Yet in good lush years the mothers of twins and triplets will pass back and forth through a big flock of other bleating ewes and lambs and won't graze off until they've found their own babies.

Rodeo acts have horses counting with their front feet. Granted, all the kids running up and down the aisles and hot dog peddlers hollering their heads off must make the count hard for old Ringo, or old Sorrel to keep things straight. Nevertheless, just think how hard a time a mother ewe has counting up to two or three in a swarm of lambs trying their best to nurse any ewe in sight.

Watch some afternoon at nursery schools at the 5 o'clock pickup hour. Angus cows nursing big calves are easier to pair up than a playground full of four-year-old kids bucking and fighting on the slides and over the sandboxes. True the mothers have to sign serious legal

contracts saying they'll retrieve their whole brood, but still compared to ewe's education and a human's schooling, the animal's ability is astounding.

So I'll bet they can count to three. It'll be hard to prove without joining us on a round-up. As July weather approaches, this is one instance in which taking my word would be the best choice.